DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 082 225 CS 200 711

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TITLE	The Role of the Campus Newspapers in the New Youth Vote.
INSTITUTION	Michigan State Univ., East Lansing. Dept. of Communication.
PUB DATE	Aug 73
NOTE	12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism Conference (Fort Collins, Colorado, August, 1973)
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS	College Students; Elections; Journalism; Mass Media; *Newspapers; Political Attitudes; *Political Issues; School Community Relationship; School Newspapers; School Surveys; Student Behavior; Student Opinion; *Student Publications; *Voting; *Youth

ABSTRACT

The impact of the student newspaper at Michigan State University on the decision making of student voters was assessed by studying the findings of telephone interviews conducted during the 1971 local East Lansing (Michigan) City Council campaign, one of the first elections in which 18 year olds could vote, and the findings of a similar investigation which focused on the 1972 presidential primary in Michigan, where students were voting on national candidates. In the city council election, students were more heavily exposed to the campus "daily" than to other mass media of interpersonal sources, and the influence was effective. The newspaper was an important force in stimulating students to register to vote. However, in the national election, surveys showed that the news paper's endorsement of one candidate did not influence the attitudes of the students. It was concluded that the campus newspaper may play an important role in student voting in new and uncertain elections but is of much less importance in national political issues and candidate choice. (EE)

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The Role of the Campus Newspaper in the New Youth Vote

Mass Communication and Society Division

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This paper assesses the impact of the student newspaper at Michigan State University on the decision-making of student voters in both local and national election contexts. One study was conducted during the 1971 East Lansing, City Council campaign, one of the first elections where 18-year olds could vote. A similar investigation focused on the 1972 presidential primary in Michigan, where students were voting on nationally prominent candidates.

Since many college students do not follow the party orientation of their parents and are unfamiliar with the political issues and candidates in the local community, they must rely on the local newspaper on campus for political information and guidance. In more salient campaigns featuring familiar political personalities and issues, they have a greater knowledge and attitudinal base for decision-making, and do not have as much dependence on the advice of their student paper.

In the city council election, students were more heavily exposed to the campus daily than other mass media or interpersonal sources, and many cited the newspaper as an influential factor in their voting behavior. The influence of the newspaper's editorial endorsement was substantial, particularly for the less informed voters who waited until the last minute to decide. In addition, the paper was an important force in stimulating students to register to vote.

A quasi-experiment comparing similar samples of student respondents the day before and the day after the newspaper's endorsement of McGovern in the primary election indicated that almost no students were influenced, and that few even sought out the editorial recommendation.

The findings suggest that campus newspapers may play an important role in student decision-making in new and uncertain voting situations, but are much less important in national contests.

CS 200 711

With the Passage of the 26th Amendment lowering the voting age to 18, millions of college students became eligible to cast ballots for the first time. This paper assesses the impact of the student newspaper at Michigan State University on the decision-making of student voters in both local and national election contexts.

Most states have ruled that students may vote in the college towns where they attend school, giving the young voters a numerical advantage over permanent residents in many locations. A study was conducted during the 1971 East Lansing City Council campaign, one of the first elections where 18-year olds could vote. For a number of reasons, it was expected that the student newspaper would have a major effect on voting behavior in this local election.

A second study focused on the 1972 Presidential Primary in Michigan, where students were voting on nationally prominent candidates. This provided a very different context for the local media influence process, and a much more limited impact was anticipated.

Why should the campus newspaper be so influential in the local election? First, the incoming student seldom possesses any knowledge or attitudes about the local political environment. Previous exposure to the partisan preferences of the family, the civics program in school, and the political coverage in the hometown and national mass media cannot be readily transferred to the new political context.

The local candidates and issues are typically unfamiliar to the student first arriving on a college campus, and to many of those who have spent a year or two on campus. The nonpartisan nature of many city and county elections precludes using party labels as voting guidelines; besides, almost half of the new voters do not identify with either major party. Finally, it can be argued that partisan primary group norms for voting behavior are less pervasive in the student community than in the adult world. Although certain segments of the college society are highly politicized, the average student is not exposed to the extensive family and working group pressures of the typical adult.

Thus, many students must turn to the mass media for both information and advice regarding local politics. Since student usage of off-campus newspapers and television is often restricted, the campus daily tends to be the primary source of political news and opinion. Roper has shown that the general public tends to rely on the newspaper for coverage of local politics, and on television for state and national political affairs. This tendency may be stronger among collegians who typically place a high degree of trust in campus periodicals staffed by fellow students rather than establishment journalists.

On the other hand, state and national political figures and issues are more familiar to the transient student. His political socialization from such agents as the family, school, and mass media has generally been a more fully developed process in this sphere. Even without party labels as the primary source of guidance, collegians tend to readily distinguish the major candidates and arrive at voting decisions without direct mass media inputs at the decisional stage. Thus, a utilitarian reliance on the campus daily is less necessary in such situations. Of course, the media still provide a major avenue for informational stimuli regarding the key candidates and issues.

This basic argument is supported by a number of studies indicating that newspaper editorial endorsements of political candidates have the most influence in less salient campaigns. Gregg found that about three-fourths of the local and regional candidates endorsed by eleven California newspapers won in the newspaper's home county between 1948 - 1962. The relationship was not as strong for statewide and national offices, leading Gregg to conclude that the greatest influence occurs where there are few other determinants affecting the voter's decision (1).

A survey by McCombs during the 1966 election in Los Angeles suggested that up to one-fifth of the voters where influenced by newspaper and television endorsements, with the highest rate for offices where there were few informational inputs or were conflicting pressures on the voter (2). There is also supportive evidence from elections where there were unusually long ballots, such as the 1964 Illinois at-large contest (3).

Three studies suggest that a substantial proportion of the electorate rely on newspaper recommendations for non-national contests. When Vinyard and Siegel asked a Detroit sample how much they depended on the newspaper in voting decisions in non-partisan elections, more than three-fourths responded "quite a bit" or "a lot" (4). Rarick reported that more than two-fifths of an Oregon sample indicated that they would take the advice of

the local newspaper on ballot referrenda, and one-quarter of an Ohio sample interviewed by Blume and Lyons said they considered their newspaper's endorsement during decision-making at election time (5).

Nevertheless, conventional wisdom among social scientists who have examined mass media influences on voting behavior holds that the media are largely impotent (6). It should be pointed out that most research has focused on elections involving prominent personalities and established partisan inclinations. This basic finding should be expected to apply to the Michigan primary context, but the special conditions in local elections involving little-known candidates and weakly disposed student voters should produce a more significant role for the campus newspaper.

Study I -- City Council Election

East Lansing is a university town that had approximately 14,000 registered voters before the students arrived for classes in September, 1971. The vast majority were adult townspeople. Early in the school year, the State News, the campus newspaper with a daily circulation of 40,000, actively campaigned to encourage students to sign up with the city registrar. Of course, this is a first crucial step to be achieved before young citizens are able to exercise political influence - and numerous studies have shown that eligible voters under the age of 30 have the lowest registration rate of any group in the country. Almost 8,000 students were registered during the Autumn campaign.

The November election featured a hotly contested race between student-oriented and town-oriented candidates for three available seats on the five-man city council. From the beginning of the Autumn quarter, the State News provided extensive coverage of the election campaign, culminating in a detailed two-page description of the qualifications and issue positions of the seven major candidates. On election eve, the newspaper editorially endorsed two of the candidates and encouraged students to turnout in a second editorial.

Telephone interviews were conducted with a representative sample of 739 undergraduate and graduate students enrolled for the Autumn quarter (7). Most of the analyses examine data from the 165 students who were registered to vote in the local election. Interviews were conducted during the week prior to the November 2 election, and 133 of the respondents were re-interviewed in a post-election wave of telephone calls.

Impact On Voter Registration: The survey showed that 62% of the eligible voters were registered, either in East Lansing, surrounding townships, or their hometowns. The majority of those in the East Lansing voting district signed up during the intensive registration campaign preceding the election.

Students were asked, "Did anyone try to talk you into registering locally?", and "Did you read anything in the State News about registering to vote?" Only 26% reported interpersonal persuasion attempts from either friends or campaign workers, while 81% said they had been exposed to articles in the newspaper. This subgroup was asked if the State News had "any influence on your decision to register" and 36% replied that it did.

The relatively greater impact of the student newspaper can a also be assessed with a comparison of the registration rates of those who were exposed to each source of influence. Among the eligible students who were personally contacted, 49% actually registered to vote, while 68% of the eligible respondents reading newspaper stories became registered.

The magnitude of registration and the importance of the State News in this act is particularly significant when national registration figures are examined. According to a 1970 Gallup Poll, the rate of registration declines with age: From 86% among those 50 and older, to 79% in the 30-49 age bracket, to 58% for 25-29 year olds, to 34% of the 21-24 age group. In addition, a Gallup Poll of youth between 18-23 years old conducted in September 1971 showed that only 27% where registered (8). Since the proportion of young adults who are normally registered in so low, the influence of the campus newspaper on registration rates may be as important as the influence on candidate preferences.

Exposure To Campaign Communications: Respondents were asked a number of questions about the amount of communication during this city council campaign. Among the mass media items, 86% of the students reported reading at least a few campaign articles in the State News, while only 26% heard anything on the radio.

Interpersonal communication was far less frequent than newspaper exposure: Although 75% talked with friends at least occasionally, only 25% reported that someone had tried to influence them, 19% heard candidates speak in person, and 13% tried to convince someone to vote for a particular candidate.

In the post-election survey, an open-ended question asked voters to recall the articles and advertisments they read during the last few days of the campaign. Fully 72% read the two-page story profiling qualifications and viewpoints of the major

candidates, and 70% noticed one or more of the candidates' ads. In addition, 55% were exposed to the editorial endorsement and 59% read the editorial urging a heavy student turnout.

As Table 1 indicates, the older students were somewhat more heavily exposed to campaign communications than the 18 to 20 year olds who constituted the new youth voting bloc. The differences are strongest for interpersonal communication, while newspaper exposure differed only slightly by age group. Thus, the newly enfranchised voters would appear to be more dependent on the mass media than interpersonal sources for information and influence.

The students were also asked to rate the trustworthyness of the State News political coverage. Only 1% said that the newspaper was "very unfair", 23% gave a "somewhat unfair" evaluation, and 76% agreed that the newspaper was "pretty much fair."

Newspaper Exposure and Information Gain: Two items measured the amount of political knowledge about the City Council campaign. Respondents were asked to name the seven major candidates and to identify which were campus-oriented in their outlook. They were also questioned about their perceptions of the key issue in the election.

A political information index constructed from responeses to these items correlated +.40 with the amount of exposure to campaign articles in the State News. As expected, amount of campaign interest and interpersonal communication were also associated with both political information and newspaper reading. These two variables were statistically controlled in an attempt to assess the independent contribution of newspaper exposure. The partial correlation was +.26, suggesting that newspaper reading was an important source of campaign knowledge aside from these other factors.

State News Impact On Voting: Among the 133 students contacted in the post-election survey, 98 reported that they had voted in the election. After they listed the articles or advertisements that they had been exposed to, all voters were asked, "Did any of these (articles, advertisements) in the newspaper help you in making up your mind about who to vote for? Which one?"

In response to this open-ended question, 50% of the voters specifically mentioned the two-page description of candidates and issues as a factor in their voting decision. The editorial endorsement was cited by 18% of the voters, followed by 13% for candidate ads.

To assess the impact of the State News endorsement, the sample can be divided according to time of voting decision. Respondents were asked, "Can you remember when you made your decision on who to vote for...was it on election day, or the day before the election, sometime last week, or before that?" Since the editorial recommendation appeared on the morning of election eve, those who decided after that point were separated into the "late decider" group comprizing one-third of the sample. The remaining voters are "early deciders."

Slightly more than half of the late deciders reported reading the editorial, and exactly 50% answered correctly when asked to identify the names of the endorsed candidates. Those who responded correctly were then asked, "Among the factors that affected your voting decision, how important was the recommendation in the State News editorial? Was it very improtant, fairly important, or not too important in making your decision?"

Among this subgroup of late deciders, 56% indicated that the endorsement was very important or fairly important in their voting choice.

A second indication of the editorial's influence that does not depend on self-reported impact is a comparison of the voting behavior of readers and non-readers of the editorial. Two of the seven major candidates were endorsed by the newspaper. An average of 88% of the editorial readers voted for the endorsed candidates, compared to an average of 81% of those not exposed. On the other hand, these was no difference between readers and non-readers for the other candidates: An average of 22% of the readers voted for non-endorsed candidates, compared to 23% of the non-readers.

Study II -- Michigan Primary Election

In the Spring of 1972, the Presidential Primary trail led to Michigan for a key test of the McGovern and Wallace candidacies. The contenders were a well-known group of political personalities in the national spotlight, rather than an unfamiliar set of local candidates aspiring for a council seat. One week before the primary election day, the campus newspaper planned to announce their editorial endorsement with a banner headline and picture.

Anticipating this message, a quasi-experiment was designed with a sample of Michigan State University students in a field setting. A representative set of respondents were drawn and randomly assigned to be called either the day before or the day of the editorial. Thus, 194 students were telephoned during the

evening preceding the newspaper endorsement, and an equivalent group of 148 were interviewed on the evening after the editorial appeared. Although there are several minor threats to internal validity with such a design, a difference between the two groups of respondents should be attributable to the message available to the "experimental" group and not available to the "control" group.

Exposure To Campaign Communications: Data from the two groups can be combined to obtain overall findings concerning interpersonal and mass communication behavior. Exposure to the State News was somewhat higher than in the City Council election. When asked, "About how many of the State News articles about the primaries have you read this spring?" 25% said "most of them", 28% reported "half of them", and 37% replied "just a few." Broadcast exposure was also heavy, with 71% listening to radio news and 76% watching national news telecasts at least once a week. Beyond this, 61% viewed the late-evening news specials reporting election results in other state primaries.

Interpersonal communication was substantially higher, with 93% talking with friends or acquaintances about the primaries, including 20% "very often" and 36% fairly often." In addition, 26% tried to influence others and 35% were subject to persuation attempts.

From these findings, it is clear that the Presidential Primary campaign was a frequent topic of communication. Interpersonal interaction was sharply increased from the City Council election, as was broadcast exposure. Thus, the potential role of the campus newspaper was less important due to these competing stimuli in this more salient election contest.

Newspaper Exposure and Information Gain: A political knowledge index was constructed from responses to questions about the names, offices, and home states of the various Democratic candidates, along with items concerning the active vs. inactive status of various candidacies and the nature of the leading political issues.

The amount of exposure to the State News correlated +.24 with the political knowledge index, and this dropped to +.16 when campaign interest was controlled. Thus, the campus newspaper does not appear to be as strong an influence on information as in the local campaign. However, the more cosmopolitan media sources are closely related to knowledge level. Exposure to outside newspapers was associated +.36 with knowledge, and viewership of television news and special programming yielded a +.32 correlation.

The degree of interpersonal discussion of the campaign was correlated +.25 with political information, but this decreased to only +.10 when mass media exposure variables were controlled. When interest was also controlled, the partial correlation was +.01. Thus, it seems clear that informational inputs can be traced primarily to the mass media rather than interpersonal channels.

State News Impact On Voting: On the day before the State News endorsement, 67% of the students planning to vote said they favored George McGovern in the Michigan Primary. President Nixon had the support of 14% of the voters, with the remaining students divided among a number of other Democratic candidates. Less than one-tenth reported that they were undecided, providing a hint that the newspaper editorial might have a limited audience of information-seekers.

Comparison with an equivalent set of voters on the evening of endorsement day showed no evidence of any impact. McGovern was supported by 65% of the students and Nixon by 15%, certainly an unimpressive difference from the "control" group. The substantial majority of the students already committed to McGovern probably provided a ceiling restricting an increase in support after the editorial.

If there was no conversion or activation effects, perhaps some reinforcement might result from the editorial among the vast number of McGovern backers. However, differences from the day before to the day of the editorial in terms of strength of preference for McGovern appear to be random. The McGovern partisans were asked, "How strongly do you favor McGovern...are you slightly in favor, somewhat in favor, or strongly in favor of him?" The proportion of strong supporters was actually slightly lower after the editorial, a difference of 55% vs. 50%.

One reason for this unsupportive set of data can be identified with an analysis of the exposure patterns for the endorsement. Only 30% of the respondents reported reading the editorial and could identify who was endorsed. Despite a large and prominent message, exposure was considerably below that in the City Council campaign. It seems likely that the lack of uncertainty about who to vote for produced little need for information from the editorial.

About three-fourths of the exposed readers favored McGovern. They were asked, "Did this editorial strengthen your intention to vote for McGovern, or did it have no effect at all." A total of 49% did report a strengthening effect, although this is not reflected in the comparison findings.

DISCUSSION

In the highly salient Presidential Primary election campaign, the campus newspaper had no discernable influence on partisan preferences and only a slight impact on information acquisition. Apparently student voters can rely on a number of other sources in their decision-making involving important national figures, and have little need for guidance from the college daily.

By contrast, the local City Council election campaign produced far different results. Students faced a unique situation that led them to rely on the campus newspaper for political information and influence. They were more heavily exposed to the newspaper than to interpersonal sources, and many cited the paper as an influential factor in arriving at their electoral decision. In addition, the campus paper was an important force in stimulating students to register.

In sum, the campus newspaper played a major role in student voting behavior in the local East Lansing election but was a negligible factor in the national contest. The basic conclusion suggested by these findings is that individuals facing new and uncertain voting situations tend to utilize the local newspaper as a critical source of information and guidance. College students in particular may find themselves in such situations more frequently than the general public with its habitual preferences and deep roots in the local political environment.

A similar situation probably exists at numerous universities around the country. The student's desire to cast an intelligent ballot, combined with his lack of knowledge and attitudes toward local candidates, produces political uncertainty that must be reduced through communication inputs. On campuses with strong student newspapers, the student is likely to turn to the paper for political news and advice. This is partially due to the lack of access to off-campus media and interpersonal opinion leaders, and partially due to the faith that students have in information and opinion diseminated by journalistic peers.

Since Michigan State is typical of a number of large state universities, the findings in this study suggest that campus newspapers in many locales may be a significant influence in the electoral behavior of student voters nationwide. From a theoretical perspective, the study indicates that the mass media can play a key role in voting behavior when other inputs are absent. The media of mass communication need not always be relegated to a secondary status in determining such important social behaviors as the voting act.

TABLE 1

PERCENT EXPOSED TO CAMPAIGN MESSAGES FROM
NEWSPAPER AND INTERPERSONAL SOURCES

Type of Message	Age of Student: Under 21	21 and older
Number of articles read in campus newspaper:		
Most of them	22%	26%
About half	20	23
A few	43	38
None	15	13
Read candidate endorsement editorial:		
Yes	53%	57%
No	47	43
Read descriptive profile of candidates and issues:		
Yes	68%	74%
No	32	26
Read get-out-and-vote editorial:		
Yes	61%	57%
No	39	43
Read one or more candidate advertisements:		
Yes	65%	76%
No	35	24
Frequency of interpersonal discussion:		
Very often	2%	10%
Fairly often	11	16
Now and then	59	50
Not at all	28	24
Exposed to interpersonal influence attempt:		
Yes	19%	28%
No	81	72
Attended candidate speech:		
Yes	11%	28%
No	89	72

N=92 (Under 21) and N=73 (21 and older) for first item and last three items; the other items were asked in post-election survey with N=52 and N=46, respectively.

Footnotes

1. James Gregg, "Newspaper Editorial Endorsements and California Elections, 1948-62", Journalism Quarterly, 42:532-38 (1965).

2. Maxwell McCombs, "Editorial Endorsements: A Study of Influence", Journalism Quarterly, 44:545-48 (1967).

3. John Mueller, "Choosing Among 133 Candidates", Public Opinion Quarterly, 34:395-402 (1970); James McDowell, "The Role of Newspapers in Illinois' At-Large Election," Journalism Quarterly, 42:281-4 (1965); and Michael Hooper, "Party and Newspaper Endorsement as Predictors of Voter Choice", Journalism Quarterly, 46:302-5 (1971).

4. Dale Vinyard and Roberta Sigel, "Newspapers and Urban Voters", Journalism Quarterly, 48:486-93 (1971).

5. Galen Rarick, "Political Persuasion: The Newspaper and the Sexes", Journalism Quarterly, 47:360-4 (1970); and Norman Blume and Schley Lyons, "The Monopoly Newspaper in a Local Election: The Toledo Blade", Journalism Quarterly, 45:286-92 (1968).

6. Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson and Hazel Gaudet, The People's Choice, (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1948); Bernard Berelson, Paul Lazarsfeld, and William McPhee, Voting (Chicago: Univeristy of Chicago Press, 1954); Harold Mendelsohn and Irving Crespi, Polls, Television, and the New Politics (Scranton, Pa.: Chandler Publishing, 1970); and Dan Nimmo, The Political Persuaders, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970).

7. The most recent official listing of Michigan State students was used to select every 42nd name after a random starting point. Thus, a sample of 1,000 undergraduate and graduate students was compiled for telephoning by 50 interviewers recruited from classes in the Department of Communication. Of this total, 91 had no telephone number listed, 161 could not be reached with at least three calls, 9 refused to be interviewed, 574 were not registered or lived outside of the voting district, and 165 were registered to vote in East Lansing. The basic sample of registered voters answered a 10-minute interview schedule, while non-registered voters were asked only a few questions about why they were not registered locally.

8. Hazel Erskine, "The Polls: The Politics of Age", Public Opinion Quarterly, 35:482-95 (1971), and "A Profile of the New Voter", Newsweek, Oct. 25, 1971, pp. 38-49.